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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to assess the arguments that have been made in favor of and opposed to the electronic curricular supplements, Channel One and CNN Newsroom. Four types of information were analyzed: (1) corporate news releases and research results were reviewed; (2) Channel One and CNN Newsroom programs were studied for format, style, and content; (3) press accounts on the programs appearing in the "New York Times" and the "Wall Street Journal" and numerous general interest and educational periodicals were analyzed in order to gauge public reaction to the services; and (4) detailed personal interviews with producers/spokespersons for both services were conducted so that production goals and future plans could be ascertained. Channel One provides 10 minutes of news and 2 minutes of commercials daily to junior and senior high school students. CNN Newsroom provides a daily 15-minute, commercial-free news program for the same audience. Other differences between the two programs are: Newsroom does not provide any equipment to the schools, while Channel One provides a $50,000 package of electronic hardware. The overall look and content of the news programs is different--CNN's news is delivered by its regular reporters and is less flashy than Channel One. The issue of using commercials has caused the biggest controversy for the news programs. Commercialization of the classroom is a worthy topic for educators and parents to discuss. What seems to be missing from this debate is an acknowledgment of television's overall limitations. Educated Americans must do more than watch the evening news to be informed. (Fifty-two footnotes are attached.) (MG)

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"TV 101: GOOD BROADCAST JOURNALISM FOR THE CLASSROOM?"

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> Optimism has been a hallmark of American life, but in the late 1980s there was deep concern about the health of the nation and its future. Jonathan Kozol's Illiterate America described a people exiled from the written word where 60 million adults within the nation's 241 million citizens could not read and understand the Bill of Rights. The United States fell far below the world's developed nations in literacy. ... A government study said that between 17 and 21 million adults could not pass a simple test. (1)

In the 1980s, an old concern was suddenly popular again. A number of new studies had suggested that American education was in serious trouble and that graduates of American high schools were not competitive with their counterparts in many foreign countries. Educators, politicians and social critics have advanced a long list of varied reasons for the problems with education in the United States. Yet, all agreed that American pupils were deficient in a wide range of areas including science, mathematics, geography, history and cultural literacy.

Particularly troublesome to some was the fact that many students had little, if any, awareness of basic current events and issues. In fact, young people were consuming very little news at all.

In 1989 two major communication companies decided to try to increase adolescent access to national and international news by developing ambitious, daily in-school news programs. Both services, Whittle Communication's Channel One and Turner Broadcasting's CNN Newsroom, have become substantial and

controversial additions to the classroom. Key educational leaders and pro-education groups have expressed sharp concerns about the arrival of the daily news services to the classroom. Several states have even tried to thwart the advance of one of the programs.

This paper will analyze the development of Channel One and CNN Newsroom in order to compare their goals, their production styles and their content. Moreover, this study will assess the arguments that have been made in favor and opposed to these electronic curricular supplements. Finally, a status report on both services' future plans will also be offered.

In order to examine each service thoroughly, four types of information were analyzed. First, corporate news releases and research results were reviewed. Second, actual Channel One and CNN Newsroom programs were studied for format, style and content. Third, press accounts on the programs appearing in the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and numerous general interest and educational periodicals were analyzed in order to gauge public reaction to the services. Finally, detailed, personal interviews with producers/spokespersons for both services were conducted so that production goals and future plans could be ascertained.

CHANNEL ONE ANNOUNCED

On January 16, 1989, Whittle Communications of Knoxville, Tennessee announced its intention to test Channel One in six

school systems. The program test for the 12-minute daily news program would feature 25 shows over a seven week period of time. The five million dollar test would be viewed by some ten thousand high school students in March and April. (2)

Each school participating in the program test would be given $50,000 worth of electronic hardware including color television sets for each classroom, VCRs and a satellite dish. Test schools had to run Channel One's ten minutes of news and two minutes of commercials for all students each day. In return, the schools received the installed equipment and the right to use the hardware for any other projects they deemed appropriate. (3)

The advantages for the school systems were obvious. In a time of limited budgets, a private company was willing to give them a state-of-the-art closed circuit television system free of charge. They also were given a slick, daily news program designed for a teenage audience to enhance current events education.

The only catch, and what would be seen by many as a substantial disadvantage to the plan, was that the schools had to agree to expose their students to the two minutes of paid advertising in each program. Whittle Communications was in the business of delivering unique audiences to major advertisers and the goal of Channel One was to penetrate a lucrative and previously untapped market -- junior and senior high schools.

WHITTLE COMMUNICATIONS BEFORE CHANNEL ONE

Whittle Communications was founded in the 1970s by a group of University of Tennessee students led by Chris Whittle and Phillip Moffitt. Their initial business venture was a survival guide for incoming freshmen called Knoxville in a Nutshell. Within a few years Nutshell, had expanded to over 60 campuses. In 1974, Whittle pioneered the first single-sponsored concept of magazine publishing with the debut of America a college travel magazine sponsored by Nissan. (4) Five years later, Whittle and Moffitt, at ages 31 and 32 respectively, bought controlling interest in prestigious Esquire magazine.

In 1986, Moffitt and Whittle broke up their partnership, and Whittle assumed complete control of Whittle Communications. In October 1988, Time, Inc. purchased 50 percent of Whittle. Today, Chris Whittle continues to oversee all of the company's operations, its 1000 employees and its $185 million of assets. (5) The firm is best known for its education, business and consumer health magazines. Special Reports, a group of oversized magazines for doctors' waiting rooms, is the company's most widely read publication. Poster advertisements for high schools and colleges have also been successful Whittle productions.

The move from posters to television programs in schools seemed like a logical step for a company that had enjoyed considerable success through the development of new advertising vehicles. Yet, the new venture led to a

firestorm of protests and a public relations nightmare for the company and its 42 year old chief executive.

THE ATTACKS AGAINST CHANNEL ONE

Within two weeks of the announcement of the test of Channel One, a large number of educational leaders and pro-education groups were lining up against its development. Not surprisingly, the brunt of the attack was on the transmission of commercial advertisements in public schools. Patricia Graham, the dean of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, termed the project "a bad idea." (6)

> I guess for me the really important issue is the captive audience. As long as we require children to sit in a classroom until age 16, they ought not be required to watch ads. (7)

Todd Gitlin, a professor of sociology at the University of California agreed. As Gitlin put it:

> When education systems are starved for resources, they will respond to the highest bidder. I don't know what to marvel at more -- the arrogance of an industry that thinks it has a right to be everywhere, or people in the education system who would consider the proposal for more than one micro-second. (8)

A large number of pro-education groups took direct aim at Channel One. Arnold Fege of the national PTA called the concept "appalling and greedy." (9) Action for Children's Television President Peggy Charren blasted the project for putting ads in the middle of the school curriculum. (10) Charren later said

Channel One was "Trivial Pursuit News" (11) and ACT has lobbied for "Whittle Free Zones" to keep Channel One out of schools. (12)

Perhaps, the network's most vocal critic was American Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker. Schanker was troubled because:

> Teachers may be forced to show programs that they do not believe will do their students any good because the district superintendent or school principal has ordered the use of the program so that the equipment is not pulled out of the school. (13)

Other education groups that have publicly comdemned Channel One include the National School Boards Association, the National Principals Association and the Parent-Teacher Association. Yet, the two most serious attacks against Channel One have been made in the nation's two most populous states.

The first state to take official action against Whittle's news show was California. One month after the conclusion of the test project, lawyers for the California public school system announced that their interpretation of the state education law disallowed programs containing advertising from being carried in schools that receive public funds. (14) California Superintendent of Public Instruction Bill Honig voiced his dislike of Channel One quite clearly.

> This is like being offered a 'free' TV that only gets one station -- a station owned by the man who sold you the set. ... Our students' minds are not for sale. (15)

Honig told reporters that Channel One was "not only immoral, it's illegal." (16) Yet, after the legal opinion had been issued, Honig said that he didn't "think any California school would risk losing state money over Channel One." (17)

The next fight for Channel One was in New York. A state education department lawyer had issued a memorandum suggesting that commercial broadcasts in public schools might be unconstitutional. The New York Board of Regents decided to discuss the program at its June 1989 meeting in Albany. As the New York Times reported, Whittle Communications decided to defend the project forcefully.

> Whittle executives from Knoxville have called each of the 16 Regents. Last week, Mr. Whittle traveled to New York City to meet Chancellor Martin C. Barrell. The company also bought a full-page advertisement in The New York Times today in the form of an open letter to the Regents, urging them to explore the programs before condemning them. (18)

Whittle's ad in the Times described the sorry state of public education in America and boasted of Channel One's performance during its seven week test project. Most noteworthy was the direct response Whittle Communication made to its enemies.

> We have no doubt, of course, that some diehard critics of the commercials that allow us to fund Channel One and provide the hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of equipment necessary to air it will still rail against the program.

> But what's becoming more and more apparent is that these critics are willing to condemn a generation of students to its current distressing level of awareness for the sake of an abstract principle.
>
> And one that was abandoned a long time ago, at that.
>
> From classrooms to libraries, educational materials are already sponsored by a substantial amount of advertising. So to oppose Channel One on that basis simply isn't logical. (19)

Prior to its showdown in Albany, Whittle Communications announced the results of several research studies on Channel One. The first report compared the results of a world and national events multiple choice examination given to the 11,000 students who participated in the Channel One pilot test with results from five "control" schools of similar size and student population that didn't receive Channel One. Not surprisingly, Channel One students "had significantly higher correct responses on 138 questions" on the 169 question exam. (20)

The news release announcing the positive test results was distributed just one week prior to the New York Regents meeting. Chris Whittle was quick to point out that his service was a positive educational resource. As Whittle noted:

> The test results show us Channel One can make students much more aware about the world in which they live in presenting serious news and information in a format relevant to them.
>
> These results are exciting to us, and should be exciting to educators. It can be a powerful tool for teachers in the classroom. It makes us all the more optimistic about Channel One. (21)

Whittle had released the results of another research study in time for the Regents lobbying effort. Whittle had commissioned The Gallup Organizations, Inc. to survey public attitudes about Channel One. Through a mall intercept survey of teenagers, parents of teenagers and adults without teenagers, Gallup tried to measure attitudes of individuals who could be shown a Channel One broadcast. All respondents were interviewed for their reactions after seeing the program. Gallup also conducted a random telephone survey of 1007 adults to measure attitudes of adults who had only heard of the service or were unaware of it. (22)

As Gallop reported:

> More than eight in ten teenagers and non-parents think showing commercials with this type of program in high school is acceptable. Three-quarters (75%) of parents throught this was acceptable. About one-quarter of parents and non-parents thought the commercials were too long. One in five teenagers agreed with this assessment. However, most thought the length of the commercials were about right.
>
> In general, most teenagers (85%), parents (87%) and non-parents (88%) would be interested in seeing Channel One shown at their local high school. (23)

The Gallop survey also noted that those who viewed the videotape of Channel One were more likely to approve of it than those who were merely read a description of the show over the phone. (24)

Channel One executives also decided to give some ground in the service they now proposed for national use. Unlike in the test project, Channel One would not require that schools put

television sets in every classroom and have every student watch the program. Moreover, Whittle decided to offer two additional channels for more instructional programming for students and teachers. Whittle said it would pay $500,000 a year to provide programs for the extra channels. (25)

Whittle was helped on the day of the Regents meeting by a positive editorial in the New York Times urging the Regents to allow schools to make their own decisions on the service.

Yet, in spite of its massive public relations effort, Whittle lost the New York public schools when the Regents voted unanimously to prohibit commercially sponsored television programs. The Regent vote authorized the New York Education Department to:

> take strong action, including the withholding of all state aid or the dismissal of school administrators, against any school or school district that accepts commercially sponsored television programs. (26)

Whittle's loss in New York was good news to Channel One's critics. ACT President Charren said she doubted Whittle's program could now survive. (27)

CHANNEL ONE: THE SHOW

According to its promotional brochure, Channel One tries to achieve five educational goals. The goals identified are:

* To enhance cultural literacy
* To promote critical thinking
* To provide a common language and shared experience

* To provide relevance and motivation
* To strengthen character and build a sense of responsibility (28)

The Channel One broadcast opens with about three minutes of national and international news reported as short items of interest. Each story is preceded by a zoom-in map to identify where the news is happening. The headlines are follwed by a segment that goes into a single story in detail. After a one minute commercial break, a weekly, 5-part series is run. After the second commercial break, a rotating feature of interest to teens is presented.

The entire production is a fast-paced, high energy show with young hosts and reporters. The anchors and reporters are dressed casually and could easily pass for VJs on MTV. As Walter Goodman's review in the New York Times noted:

> The anchors, Ken Rogers [son of recording artist Kenny Rogers] and Lynn Blades, and the program's correspondent, Brian Tochi, look like high schoolers who have won all the awards; it will not escape attention that Mr. Rogers is white, Ms. Blades is black and Mr. Tochi is Oriental. (29)

Initially, the show was criticized for being too fast and "too flashy." (30) After several weeks, the producers worked on changing the tone of the program. Longer stories, more words and maps were stressed to improve its informational quality. (31) Yet, from the beginning, Whittle executives claim, they were impressed with the impact the show was having on the students. Most school libraries reported heavier numbers of books and

magazines checked out, and in one school, teachers observed a hallway argument over John Tower's confirmation hearing. (32)

The commercials on Channel One, as one would guess, are designed with a young audience in mind. Typical products advertised during the pilot test included candy, chewing gum, shampoo, jeans, and potato chips. Some public service announcements were also aired.

FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR CHANNEL ONE

David Jarrard, Whittle's Communications' chief spokesman, said that his firm was jarred by the intensity of the debate over Channel One. Jerrard said that he "thought it would [have been] more rational." (33) He said that he was particularly disappointed with the reaction of those "who hadn't seen it or who didn't know it." (34)

While the extensive protest over Channel One may have been a temporary setback for Whittle Communications, it appears that the service is very much alive. Whittle announced in August that it had established a prestigious "Council of Advisors" to review Channel One "and offer their suggestions for its future direction." (35) Council members include former U.S. Secretary of Education T.H. Bell, industrialist Ross Perot and American Federation of Teachers President (and Channel One critic) Albert Shanker. In October, Whittle named a 21 member "Educational Advisory Board" of classroom teachers to serve as "a sounding board on educational content for Channel One." (36) Whittle

spokesman Jarrard insisted that the two groups were not created in response to the protests over Channel One, but instead were natural outgrowths of the test project. (37)

Channel One plans to roll out as a national service in 1,000 schools on March 5, 1990. On October 30, 1989, Whittle announced that over 500 schools in 238 different school districts in 24 states had already signed up for the service. (38) Whittle's Jerrard said that only ten percent of the school systems approached so far have turned down the service and that even a small number of schools in California (less than ten) have signed contracts. (39) Gerrard claims that Whittle's overall goal of signing up 8,000 schools by the end of 1990 and having all schools on line by the end of 1991 is still the company's plan. (40) Yet another measure of the program's success is the fact that in 90 days of sales Whittle had signed $149 million in advertising contracts. (41)

CNN NEWSROOM

Channel One will not be the only classroom news service available to junior and senior high schools in 1990. Shortly after the publicity of Whittle's Spring 1989 six school project test, the in-school news field got crowded. On April 26, 1989, R. E. "Ted" Turner, the president and chairman of Turner Broadcasting System, Inc., announced the development of a new daily, 15-minute, commercial-free news program for junior and senior high schools. Turner told the National Press Club in

Washington, D.C. that the new service, called CNN Newsroom, would begin national distribution on August 14, 1989.

In announcing the new service, Turner noted that:

> We will launch our school news program, CNN Newsroom, nationwide when school begins this fall. We want teachers to use CNN Newsroom as they see fit, so we will not ask any school or teacher to sign a contract. CNN Newsroom will be a public service of TBS and the cable industry, without ads.
>
> We will offer our nation's schools the best that CNN's 1600 superb television journalists can provide, with our 21 bureaus worldwide and our extensive network of international and domestic broadcast affiliates. We will provide free teaching aids daily by electronic mail. Then we'll let teachers and students decide whether to join in. (42)

The daily program is carried by Cable News Network at 3:45 A.M. (ET) and is recorded for use in the schools. Schools can also access a daily classroom guide by using electronic text services. The daily guide outlines questions and concepts for discussion, classroom and homework activities and is prepared overnight by two teachers who work on the nine person Newsroom production team. (43) Turner's program is free to all schools and the classroom guides cost only $100 a year. (44) As of November 1989, over two thousand schools have signed up for the service, but at this moment CNN doesn't know how many are using the show and how it is being used. A user study is currently underway. (45)

CNN Newsroom's Executive Producer, Jay Suber, claims that Turner's service wasn't a response to Whittle's entry into the

classroom. He sees Newsroom as a natural outgrowth of CNN's Week in Review, an hour-long review of national and international news that Turner has been allowing school systems to tape for eight years. (46)

CNN NEWSROOM: THE SHOW

There are three big differences between CNN Newsroom and Channel One. First, Newsroom contains no commercials and has therefore produced little in the way of criticism, controversy or publicity. Second, Newsroom also doesn't provide any equipment to the school systems. Whittle's Jerrard maintained that the difference between Channel One and CNN Newsroom was that "people can watch ours." (47) Since many school systems are short on audio/video support, Channel One's $50,000 hardware package is a major bonus. For Turner's system to work, schools must provide their own hardware.

The third major difference between the services is CNN's overall look and content. The news is delivered by many of CNN's regular reporters. Two anchors and two correspondents who do stories for a student audience certainly make their mark on the show, but as CNN's Suber put it: "We are not trying to come down to students. [We aren't targeting] the lowest common denominator." (48) The stories on CNN Newsroom are longer than those on Channel One and they appear to be less flashy.

CNN has conducted focus group research with both students and teachers. The research, according to Suber, suggested that

early shows were too fast and tried to cover too many stories. Suber said that CNN offers fewer reports and those aired are "more in depth." Suber admits that he is worried about how the show is being used. In some schools it has been played as background noise in the lunch room, where only the brave would dare watch it. (49)

Suber said that CNN is doing the show for two reasons. First, Newsroom fits into Ted Turner's overall vision for his network. As Turner has put it:

> Our company has been pioneering ways of strengthening the nation's educational system with the help of quality television programming for years. ... Helping students learn to cope with an increasingly complex and sometimes threatening world through daily news and information programming is a natural next step for us. (50)

The second reason for launching the service, according to Suber, is to make future CNN viewers out of the young people going to school. (51)

Though Suber refused to compare Newsroom to Channel One, he did criticize the notion of a school news program with commercials. He said that CNN has run into enough resistence to this concept with teachers afraid of VCRs, electronic mail and television in the classroom. He saw no reason "to kill a good product before it got into the room." Being commercial free "makes good damn sense," according to Suber. "Books don't have commercials in them." (52)

CONCLUSIONS

Whittle Communications not only defends the idea of supporting Channel One through commercials, they have announced plans to put commercials in special books for corporate executives too! Whittle's experiment has already made a lot of waves and if successful, it will undoubtedly make more. Channel One is more than a new way to teach students what's new in the world. It is an innovative way for advertisers to reach a very desirable audience while it is held captive.

Clearly, the Weekly Reader, a staple for many a youngster in school, doesn't pack the same amount of excitement that it used to hold. News for today's junior and senior high school students, if they are going to watch it at all, must be exciting and relevant to them. That shouldn't surprise us. Their parents expect the same from their news programs at home.

The commericialization of the classroom is certainly a worthy topic for educators and parents to discuss. Some argue that ads are everywhere and a few more won't hurt. Others say that the school day is already too short and that forcing a captive audience to watch advertisements is wrong under any circumstances.

What seems to be missing from this debate is an acknowledgement of television's overall limitations. Certainly, TV can be a powerful teaching tool. But, television news, even at its best, is compressed and simplified into a headline service.

Educated Americans must do more than watch the evening news to be informed. They must be more diversified news consumers. Using television in a classroom is fine, but if it becomes our only conduit for the news of the world we have done young people a great disservice. If the headlines on TV prompt students to read more about current events, geography and history, the services will have succeeded -- with or without commercials. Yet, if TV news is the only role model provided for information seekers, we haven't given them very much.

FOOTNOTES

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FOOTNOTES (CONT.)

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(45) Derrick interview.

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(49) Suber interview.

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